

OFF-ROAD VEHICLE COURSE ASSOCIATED WITH COMMERCIAL COMPLEX

Related Application

This application claims the benefit of the filing date of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/426,380, filed on November 15, 2002.

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Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to vehicle courses, and in particular, an off-road vehicle course operated in association with a commercial complex.

Background of the Invention

During the last decade, sports utility vehicles ("SUV") and four-wheel drives
10 (often termed "4x4's") have increased in popularity. These "off-road" vehicles typically offer advantages not provided by sedans and other smaller vehicles. SUV's and most 4x4's typically provide extra interior room for passengers and carrying capacity. They are also typically designed with sturdier suspension systems and have greater ground clearance for better performance and safety in off-road conditions. They are also often
15 larger and heavier so that they stand up better in performance crash tests.

Manufacturers of off-road vehicles often tout how well their automobiles handle and perform in off-road conditions, such as in television commercials and the like. For example, many TV commercials show off-road vehicles traveling on rough terrain, wherein the message that is being conveyed to consumers is how well these vehicles
20 handle, perform and stand up to the most difficult of off-road conditions.

Yet, vehicle dealerships that sell off-road vehicles typically only allow consumers to test-drive their vehicles on paved roads and streets, not on off-road terrain. Most consumers that are looking to buy off-road vehicles, therefore, never get the chance to

test-drive those vehicles under the conditions that they were supposedly designed for. Accordingly, most consumers end up making purchase decisions without having had a chance to test drive the vehicles in off-road conditions, i.e., to determine whether the advertising claims are true.

5 Also, a significant percentage of people in this country that buy off-road vehicles live in suburban areas where there are few opportunities to drive them off-road. Other than a few sparse areas, there are typically no designated off-road areas or courses available where vehicle owners can take their vehicles off-road for recreational purposes. In many cases, locations where they can be driven off-road are hundreds of
10 miles away, making it inconvenient and impractical to do so.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention relates to an off-road vehicle course associated with a commercial complex, such as a vehicle dealership or shopping center, which overcomes the disadvantages discussed above.

15 When associated with a vehicle dealership, the present invention contemplates an off-road vehicle course that is operated in conjunction with the dealership. The course, in such case, can be located on, adjacent or near the dealership, and is preferably operated by, or under the direction of, the dealership. This way, consumers will be able to test drive the off-road vehicles that they are interested in buying before
20 making their purchase decisions, in the off-road conditions that the vehicles are designed for.

The course itself can be created with a variety of different terrains and obstacles specially designed for off-road vehicles. For example, the course can be made using

dirt, gravel, sand, rocks, grass, water, etc., and can have hills, slopes, inclines, declines, mounds, pits, bumps, etc., as well as ditches, ravines, bridges, trees, bushes, fences, walls, potholes, etc. These terrains and obstacles can be arranged in any manner that creates an effective and entertaining course for test-driving purposes. The course can
5 also be as long or short as needed, and can have several different paths, if desired, so that more than one vehicle can be on the course at any given time, without the risk of accident.

Various methods of operating the course are contemplated. For example, the dealership can allow customers the opportunity to test-drive cars for free, based on a
10 judgement of how serious the customer might be in buying the vehicle at that time. Likewise, the dealership can charge a fee to each person that uses the course, wherein it can also reimburse the fee if and when a vehicle is purchased from that dealership, as a means of giving an incentive. The dealership could also allow customers to compare their old vehicles with new ones. For example, the dealership could allow customers to
15 drive their own off-road vehicles, as well as the new vehicles, which can help customers fully appreciate the differences between them.

When a group of dealerships is involved, the dealerships preferably enter into an agreement to have an off-road course developed and/or operated jointly. Dealerships are often clustered together in a geographical area, such as due to restrictive zoning
20 laws. In such case, the off-road course could be located on, adjacent or near one or more of the dealerships in the group. The course can also be operated by one of the dealerships, a designated independent operator, or jointly by the group or more than one dealership, etc. In such case, each dealership in the group could contribute to the

up-front cost of developing the course, as well as the cost of maintaining and operating the course, and in return, each dealership could be allowed to use the course, i.e., allow their customers to test-drive their vehicles on the course. The dealerships could also jointly contribute to the cost of marketing, advertising, etc.

5 The present invention also contemplates a business method wherein the dealership or dealerships can promote the off-road vehicle course as a means of attracting customers to the dealership(s). For example, when a single dealership is involved, the off-road vehicle course could be developed to draw attention to that dealership, and when a group of dealerships is involved, the entire group could use the
10 course to attract customers to that location, and away from other locations, where other dealerships may be located. Being the only dealership or group of dealerships in that geographical area that can offer the advantages of an off-road test course can make it more likely that consumers will go to that location.

 The present invention also contemplates using an off-road vehicle course as a
15 means of providing recreational entertainment to attract patrons to a commercial complex, such as a shopping center. Many shopping malls, especially in rural and suburban areas, are located on open land. Many outlet malls, for example, are located on wide-open spaces, such as near farms, highways and industrial/commercial areas. These conditions make it commercially feasible and possible for land to be purchased
20 and an off-road vehicle course to be developed and operated in conjunction therewith.

 The course could be designed to provide recreational off-road entertainment for off-road vehicle owners and enthusiasts, which can have the effect of attracting patrons to the shopping center. For example, the off-road course can be operated on or

adjacent the shopping center property, which may not only help draw attention to the shopping center, but can also provide a source of entertainment and recreation for shopping center patrons. The course can also have a few rental vehicles on hand, and/or allow people with their own off-road vehicles to drive on the course, i.e., for a fee.

5 Operation of the course could also be coordinated so that discounts and incentives can be provided that can help promote retail establishments located at the shopping center, while at the same time, promoting the course. For example, a discount can be given to a retail establishment whenever a patron uses the course. Likewise, whenever a patron buys a certain minimum quantity at a retail establishment,
10 a discount to use the course can be given.

 The present invention also contemplates using the vehicle course in conjunction with both a vehicle dealership and shopping center, wherein the course can be used to promote not only the cars that are being sold at the dealership, but also the shopping center and its retail establishments, which can be located adjacent or near the
15 dealership.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIGURE 1 shows an off-road vehicle course operated in association with a vehicle dealership; and

FIGURE 2 shows an off-road vehicle course operated in association with a
20 shopping center having a vehicle dealership located therein.

Detailed Description of the Invention

1. Vehicle Dealership:

Vehicle dealerships are like any other business in that they need business income to operate. The main source of income, in such case, comes from automobile sales. While a particular consumer's interest in a particular dealership will usually come from the interest that he or she has in the cars that the dealership sells, there is usually great competition among sellers of cars. This is true with respect to dealerships that sell competing brand named cars, such as Chevrolet, Ford, Honda and Toyota, but this is also true with respect to dealerships that sell the same brand named cars. For example, while there is obviously great competition between Chevrolet and Ford, and between Honda and Toyota, etc., there can also be great competition among dealerships within those same organizations, i.e., between different Chevrolet dealerships, between different Honda dealerships, between different Ford dealerships, and between different Toyota dealerships, etc., each vying for a share of the business.

Various promotional offers, including sales and discounts, can be offered by dealerships to attract customers to their stores. Advertisements on television, radio and newspapers, etc., are commonly used for this purpose. Various marketing techniques, including offering better financing terms on loans, lower down payments, rebates, free options, higher prices on trade-ins, etc., are often employed. Dealerships also typically pay commissions to sales agents to give them incentives to sell more cars.

While many dealerships sell certain makes of cars, some of the most popular cars on the market today are SUV's and 4x4's. Names like Jeep Cherokee, Ford Expedition, Honda CRV, Toyota Forerunner, are commonplace. For this reason,

dealerships that carry brand named automobiles inevitably carry a number of SUV and 4x4 models, which are extremely popular.

The present invention relates to a method wherein an off-road vehicle course can be used in conjunction with a vehicle dealership, to allow its customers to test-drive the off-road vehicles that they are interested in, under the conditions the vehicles were designed for. This way, consumers that are looking to buy a particular off-road vehicle will have an opportunity to test-drive that vehicle, as well as others, in the off-road conditions that they were designed for, before making a purchase decision.

When associated with a single vehicle dealership, as shown in Figure 1, the present invention contemplates that the course can be located on, adjacent or near the dealership's property. The dealership can, for example, convert some of its existing land into an off-road course, or, it can purchase extra land adjacent or nearby the dealership.

The course itself can have a variety of different terrains and obstacles. For example, the course can be made using dirt, gravel, sand, rocks, grass, water, etc. It can have hills, slopes, inclines, declines, mounds, pits, bumps, etc., as well as obstacles, including ditches, ravines, bridges, trees, bushes, fences, walls, potholes, etc. The terrains and obstacles can be arranged in any manner that creates an effective and entertaining course for test-driving purposes. The course can also be as long or short as needed, and can have several different paths, if desired, so that more than one vehicle can be on the course at any given time, without the risk of accident.

Various methods of operating the course are contemplated. For example, the course can be operated by the vehicle dealership, or by another entity under the

direction of the vehicle dealership. It can also be operated for free, based on a judgement of how serious the customer might be in buying the vehicle at that time, or, the dealership can charge a fee to each driver that uses the course, i.e., the course could be a profit-making operation, wherein drivers could be allowed to drive their own vehicles on the course, if desired. The dealership could also reimburse customers for using the course if and when a vehicle is purchased from that dealership, which would not only give the customer an incentive to come to the dealership, but also an incentive to purchase a vehicle there. Discounts on the purchase price of a vehicle when the vehicle course is used can also be provided.

Customers can be allowed to test drive their own off-road vehicles, as well as the new ones, to help customers compare the vehicles and appreciate the differences between them. In such case, the dealership could show the customer how much better the new vehicles are compared to the older vehicles.

The dealership can also dedicate certain off-road vehicles for test-driving purposes, so that not all vehicles offered for sale are available for test-driving. For example, certain vehicles can be set aside specifically for test-driving purposes, which may be advantageous due to the fact that the test driven vehicles are likely to need extra maintenance, care, and cleaning, to ensure that they are kept in good condition. Like rental cars, once the test driven cars are used and driven on the course, they may only be capable of being sold as used cars, i.e., at used car prices. The new vehicles that are offered for sale, on the other hand, can be kept new and unused. A dealership may, nevertheless, at its own discretion, allow customers that are close to buying a vehicle the opportunity to test drive the particular vehicle that they want to buy, to

enable them to see how that particular vehicle handles and performs on the course. In such case, the dealership may limit such use to only those situations where the customer has already test driven another dedicated vehicle, and is close to making a purchase decision. This way, the chances that someone might drive a brand new vehicle on the course, and end up not buying that vehicle, would be reduced.

The present invention contemplates a method wherein the dealership can advertise the off-road vehicle course as a means of attracting customers to the dealership. For example, the dealership can promote the course on television, radio, print advertisements, etc., as a means of increasing the likelihood that consumers will come to that dealership, instead of another, to test-drive their vehicles.

In this respect, the present invention contemplates that in any given geographical area, a single off-road vehicle course could be made available so that a particular dealership would stand to benefit from the course. Being the only dealership in the area to have the course and make it available to customers will enable it to use the course for promotional purposes and attract customers to that location.

The dealership could also operate the course for corporate or group outings and functions, i.e., allow SUV and 4x4 enthusiasts the opportunity to drive on the course with their own vehicles. That is, the dealership could allow the course to be rented or used by a particular company or group for a limited engagement, wherein a fee could be charged for the use of the facility, i.e., they could charge by the hour. This could be a way for the dealership to not only earn additional revenue, but to indirectly promote the course and dealership to those who attend the outing or function, and drive on the course.

Other incentives can be given to attract customers to the dealership. Various discounts and incentives, for example, can be given for trying the course. The dealership can give customers who drive on the course certain discounts that can be used at contracted establishments, such as restaurants, clothing stores, grocery stores, etc., as an incentive for using the course and trying out their vehicles.

Preferably, the dealership will obtain insurance sufficient to cover potential liabilities that might arise from operating the course. The dealership can also require customers and other users of the course to sign waivers of liability for further protection.

Vehicle dealerships are often clustered together in a geographical area, such as due to restrictive zoning laws. In such case, a group of dealerships can develop, maintain and/or operate an off-road vehicle course jointly. They can, for example, enter into an agreement, whereby each dealership in the group could contribute to the up-front costs and efforts of developing the course, as well as the cost and effort of maintaining and operating the course, and in return, each dealership could be allowed to use the course, i.e., allow customers to test-drive their vehicles on the course. The dealerships can also jointly contribute to the cost and effort of marketing, advertising, etc., wherein the dealerships could use the course as a promotional tool to help attract customers to that location.

The off-road course can be located on, adjacent or near one or more of the dealerships in the group. The course can also be operated by one of the dealerships, a designated independent operator, or jointly by the group or more than one dealership, etc. Rather than having a single dealership be responsible for the entire cost and

operation of the course, such responsibilities can be spread out between the dealerships, wherein the benefits can also be spread to group members.

The management of the course would have to take into account the interests of each dealership. For example, each dealership could make certain off road vehicles available at the course for test-driving purposes, wherein consumers can pick and choose which ones to test-drive. This would give consumers the opportunity to try out different makes and models of vehicles, wherein each dealership would be able to promote and give added exposure for its vehicles. In another embodiment, each dealership can be given access to the course during a specified time, so that at the appropriate time they can send interested drivers to the course with their vehicles to be test-driven. In such case, a scheduling system would be implemented to ensure that usage of the course is properly allocated and prioritized between the dealerships. This can give each dealership the opportunity to control the use of the course during the scheduled time, wherein each one can then give particular attention to the customers that are interested in using the course to test their vehicles.

The present invention contemplates that the course could be used in connection with a business method wherein the dealership or group of dealerships can promote the off-road vehicle course as a means of attracting customers to the dealership(s). For example, when a single dealership is involved, the off-road vehicle course could be operated to draw attention to that dealership, and when a group of dealerships is involved, the entire group could use the course to attract customers to that location. The present invention contemplates that the vehicle course could be made available in any given metropolitan or geographical area, wherein the course could be used as a

means of promoting the dealership, or group of dealerships, that operate in that area, thereby increasing the chances that their customers would visit that location and/or buy a car from that location. Being the only dealership or group of dealerships in a geographical area that can offer the advantages of an off-road test course can make it more likely that consumers will go to that location instead of another.

2. Shopping Center:

The present invention contemplates using an off-road vehicle course as a means of providing recreational entertainment to attract patrons to a commercial complex, such as a shopping center, as shown in Figure 2. Many shopping malls, especially in rural and suburban areas, are located on large open areas. Many outlet malls, for example, are located on wide-open spaces, such as near farms, highways and industrial/commercial areas. These conditions make it commercially feasible and possible for land to be purchased and an off-road vehicle course to be developed and operated in conjunction therewith.

The course itself can be created in much the same manner as the course for the car dealership described above. In addition, it can be developed so that it extends through the shopping center, or through the shopping center parking lot, or both. This way, patrons of the shopping center can become spectators, wherein they could see the cars that are on the course, such as from the parking lot or shopping center walkways. This might be especially appropriate for a shopping center that has vehicle dealerships, automobile supply stores, repair shops, service stations, tire stores, etc., or other automobile related establishments, located at the shopping center.

For example, a course can cut through the parking lot, wherein a lower level path could be developed, which would not involve any risks to spectators, wherein the path could be made with concrete walls, and have a floor of dirt, gravel, sand, rocks, etc. The path could then wind around the parking lot and possibly go through a portion of the shopping center, i.e., in another low-level path, with pedestrian bridges overhead. The path could also extend out into an open area where there could be hills, slopes, inclines, etc. Again, the course can be as long or short as needed, and can have several different paths.

The course could be designed to provide recreational off-road entertainment for off-road vehicle owners and enthusiasts, which can have the effect of attracting patrons to the shopping center. This could help draw attention to the shopping center, and provide a source of entertainment and recreation for shopping center patrons.

Operation of the course could also be coordinated so that discounts and incentives are provided that help promote retail establishments located at the shopping center, while at the same time, promoting the course. For example, a discount to a retail establishment could be given whenever a patron uses the course. Likewise, whenever a patron makes a purchase, such as a minimum quantity, at one of the retail establishments, a discount to use the course can be given.

The course can have a few rental vehicles on hand, which can be rented for predetermined lengths of time, i.e., an hour, for a fee. The course could also allow people with their own off-road vehicles to drive on the course, i.e., for a fee.

The present invention also contemplates using the vehicle course in conjunction with both a vehicle dealership and shopping center, wherein the course can be used to

promote not only the cars that are being sold at the dealership, but also the shopping center and its retail establishments, which can be located adjacent or near the dealership.